

Shaping heaven

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Like it or not, our lives inevitably intersect with the lives of others. Sometimes these intersections are happy ones, with people who support and sustain us and whose full humanity and potential we likewise respect and encourage. But some are full-on crashes with all the hurt and destruction of a vehicular collision.

These three aspects of the lectionary texts seem related: God didn't simply "spirit" the people out of their awful circumstances in Egypt; Jesus adds an explanatory coda about how human decisions shape the quality of heaven; Paul harps not only on love but also on behaving respectably. Each of these suggests that our relationship to God is inseparable from our dealings with others.

In the case of the Passover, God was unquestionably the author of the people's liberation, but, oh, the detailed instructions they were to follow! What difference would it make if you had rice and beans instead of lamb, or if you overlooked the messy bit about spreading blood on the doorposts or if you packed up the leftovers for the next day's lunch? Somehow following these precise instructions meant serving the God of freedom. You could call it a reflection of love. God liberated the people from human bondage in order that they might bind themselves in a different way to God.

The terms of their relationship to God, hammered out on Mt. Sinai, are finally about how to love God with the whole self and how to love one's neighbor. Both simple, and not so simple. Just look at all the details involved. And most of those are quite particular for a context very different from our own. If we are to take love of God and neighbor seriously, we still have to work out the countless permutations of what such love means and how best to execute it in the very real, imperfect situations of our individual lives.

Jesus and Paul agree that it requires careful consideration and judgment on our parts. In other words, as people of God, we have great responsibility to determine, in the day to day of our lives, how to love. Simply being nice isn't going to cut it. Real love in a down and dirty world requires informed deliberation and sometimes tough choices. Jesus' remark about "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" brings to mind less a geographical place than a state of being. How we love or fail to love affects our relationships both to others and to God. Maybe, as Jesus suggests, in our dealings with others, we are not only learning to love, but we are also constantly shaping heaven.